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Editorial Opinion --

CIA Defended

Harry Truman once said that it makes no difference whether U. S. national security secrets were unearthed by foreign spies or the domestic press. The resulting harm is the same.

CIA Deputy Director Lt. Gen. Vernon A. Walters recalled Truman's timely words during a recent press briefing in which Walters defended the work of his agency. The briefing, following a press luncheon sponsored by the American Security Council, represented a departure from the agency's traditional "no comment" stance in the face of public criticism. Given the hysterics that have accompanied the criticism, it is to be hoped that the CIA will continue to set the public record straight.

"The United States is in the toughest power situation we have faced since Valley Forge," Walters explained. "This is the first time since then that a foreign power has had the power to cripple us as a nation." The former career Army intelligence officer noted that the Soviet Union is now deploying four new generations of ICBMs and beefing up its total military capability well beyond its logical defensive needs.

"The question then becomes: what do they intend to use these weapons for?" he said. "It's up to the CIA to find out."

A returning theme of Walters' remarks was that it is not the activities of the U. S. intelligence community that

have changed so much as the perception of the threat against the country. Americans feel less threatened than they did 15 or 20 years ago, he reasons, and thus are less tolerant of the work of the CIA and its sister agencies.

Walters emphasized, however, that those who believe the threat has in fact decreased are deluding themselves. "The tactics may be different," he said, "but the goals have remained the same."

Walters also argued convincingly that the indiscretions of the CIA have been relatively few in relation to the scope of its work. "If you took a city of 50,000 (the total of the CIA's employees during its lifetime) and examined them carefully over 28 years, you would have more transgressions than the CIA has had."

Ideally, the current congressional hearings will result in guidelines that clearly spell out what the CIA can and cannot do. Present guidelines, which date to the agency's formation in 1947, purposely were left vague — a fact that unfortunately has given credence to charges that the agency has exceeded its mandate.

Although Walters is not optimistic that Congress will in fact offer such guidelines, for the good of the country and its vital intelligence operations, it is to be hoped that his pessimism will go unrewarded.